

SP-20



National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594

Safety Recommendation

Date: July 14, 1986

In reply refer to: H-86-26

Honorable William E. Brock
Secretary
U.S. Department of Labor
200 Constitution Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20210

Log: H-474K

On July 5, 1984, a tractor-semitrailer was following a car too closely on wet pavement near Ashdown, Arkansas. When the car slowed suddenly, the truck had to brake hard to avoid hitting it. The truck jackknifed, and the tractor rotated into the oncoming lane and struck a police car. All four police officers in the struck vehicle were killed. 1/

A tractor-semitrailer collided head-on with a church van in Lemoore, California, on October 8, 1982, killing all but 1 of the van's 11 occupants. There had been a stalled car blocking the truck's lane at an intersection. Instead of slowing down, the truck driver attempted to go around the car, and he lost control of the combination vehicle in the process. 2/

These are examples of the heavy truck 3/ accidents investigated by the National Transportation Safety Board in which driver performance was a major factor. The operation of heavy trucks places special demands on the driver, demands he or she may not always be able to meet. Long stopping distances, the possibility of brake fade on steep hills, restricted maneuverability, cargo shifting, and the danger of jackknifing are only a few of the problems that drivers of heavy trucks must face constantly, but which automobile drivers experience rarely, if at all.

1/ Highway Accident Report--"Collision of DeQueen, Arkansas, Police Department Patrol Car and Terrell Trucking, Inc., Tractor-Semitrailer, U.S. Route 71, Ashdown, Arkansas, July 5, 1984" (NTSB/HAR-84/07).

2/ Highway Accident Report--"J.C. Sales, Inc., Tractor-Semitrailer and Calvary Baptist Church Van Collision, State Route 198 at 19th Avenue near Lemoore, California, October 8, 1982" (NTSB/HAR-83/02).

3/ According to the definition used by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, all of the following are considered heavy trucks: 1) single-unit (or "straight") truck with gross vehicle weight greater than 26,000 pounds; 2) tractor-trailer combination; 3) truck pulling one or more cargo trailers; and 4) tractor pulling no trailer. A medium truck is any single-unit truck with a gross vehicle weight between 10,000 and 26,000 pounds. While this recommendation letter deals generally with drivers of heavy trucks, many of the observations apply also to those driving medium ones. Light vehicles, such as pickup trucks, are excluded.

Truck driving is a specialized skill, distinct in many ways, and more demanding than operating a smaller vehicle, such as a car. However, far too many people are able to enter the field without having first acquired that skill. The Safety Board has completed a study that examines the system that prepares candidates for employment as truck drivers and then initially places them into service. ^{4/} The objective of the study was to identify weaknesses in the system, to describe current efforts for improvement, and to offer recommendations for ways to augment those efforts.

Formal training is the most reliable way to learn the special skills required for safe truck driving. Such training is available from proprietary, State, and motor carrier--owned schools, but, at present, there are few safeguards to ensure quality of instruction and insufficient incentives for a prospective truck driver to enroll in any school.

The Department of Transportation recently issued proposed minimum standards for training truck drivers. The Safety Board has recommended that a training requirement for truck drivers, based on these standards, be incorporated into the Federal regulations for truck drivers and into the qualifications for a proposed national truck driver license. The Board also has suggested that the Professional Truck Driver Institute of the Trucking Industry Alliance develop an accreditation system that would indicate which truck driver training schools meet the standards.

An upgraded training system can be expected to produce increasingly skilled new drivers. The more driving skill that is obtained in a controlled environment, the less remains to be learned on the job. Nevertheless, the instructive role of experience is unlikely to be eliminated. When a new driver is just beginning to build up on-the-job experience, qualified supervision can help ensure that he or she develops only safe driving habits. Such supervision also can minimize the risk to the driver or to others on the road. An effective way of supervising new drivers would be through an apprenticeship program. There is currently no such nationally organized program in the United States.

The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) publishes a list of 750 "Occupations Recognized as Apprenticeshipable," but truck driving is not among them. The DOL issues national apprenticeship standards for many occupations. There is one set, for example, for operating engineers, the workers who operate equipment such as bulldozers, forklifts, cranes, and derricks. Another set is titled "National Apprenticeship Standards for Heavy Duty Truck Mechanic, Truck Body and Trailer Mechanic, and Truck Painter." The American Trucking Associations and the International Association of Teamsters also jointly publish a set of standards for truck mechanics.

Most apprenticeship standards, such as those for truck mechanics, call for on-the-job training concurrent with an established amount of classroom instruction. Truck driver apprenticeship could be arranged similarly, with the alternative, for those who have already completed a training school course, of strictly on-the-job instruction. Provision should be included for advancement from one type of vehicle to another, based on required levels of experience, training and satisfactory performance. For example, the apprenticeship standards might call for a driver to demonstrate competence on straight trucks before being allowed to drive combination vehicles. Experience might be required hauling nonhazardous materials before being allowed to transport hazardous ones.

^{4/} Safety Study--"Training, Licensing, and Qualification Standards for Drivers of Heavy Trucks" (NTSB/SS-86/02).

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the United States Department of Labor:

Draft and issue national standards for apprenticeship programs in commercial truck driving, and include commercial truck driving in the Department of Labor's list of Occupations Recognized as Apprenticeable. (Class II, Priority Action) (H-86-26)

GOLDMAN, Acting Chairman, and BURNETT, LAUBER, and NALL, Members, concurred in this recommendation.


By: Patricia A. Goldman
Acting Chairman

